



Study on Film Culture Under the Perspective of Social Class

Focus on South Korean Director Bong Joon-Ho

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Abstract. Based on some of the most representative films of South Korean director Bong Joon-ho, this study critically analyzes the causes of the solidification of social class in South Korea and the alienation of the underclass survivors. Literature research and text analysis are used to focus on shame culture and pain shown in films in order to trigger the public awareness for individual identity, national identity, and national future. The study also examines both critics and director's own views on extreme elaboration and ahead concept in the context of the controversial "Bong-style film", and further considers the social reflection of the metaphorical culture of "she" in Bong Joon-ho's works.

Keywords: Social class · Bong joon-ho · Shame culture · Pain culture · Metaphorical culture of "she"

1 Introduction

As the 92nd Oscar Academy Awards ended, South Korean director Bong Joon-ho grabbed the spotlight of the global film industry with his film *Parasite* winning four awards: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Foreign Film and Best Original Screenplay. Bong Joon-ho, who has a rich background in sociology, specializes in creating films from social reality and cultural reflection, so it is difficult to label him as "one-dimensional" and "stereotyped".

In his first film, *Barking Dogs Never Bite*, a college teacher who fails in his career and takes his anger out on his dog. In *Memories of Murder*, an incompetent policeman becomes angry because he cannot find the murderer. In the movie *Gwoemul*, the U.S. army in Korea creates a monster that makes people life chaotic. For other films, a mother who kills a witness to save her retarded son in *Mother*; a hierarchical train in *Snowpiercer* carrying humanity's last civilization is full of lies and killings; in *Parasite*, a poor family is trying to invade the lives of rich people. In contrast to subjective criticism, Bong Joon-ho makes statements about reality from metaphors, so each of his works accurately reflects the Times he lives.

Since most of the existing literature focus on Bong Joon-ho's personalized cinematographic style and screenwriting ideas, this paper will analyze the film culture displayed in his most representative works from the perspective of social class. Furthermore, the

metaphorical culture of “she”, which is unique in Bong Joon-ho’s films, is further considered, thus arousing the public reflection on female social status, living states and other issues.

2 Dystopian Branding

2.1 The External Causes of Shame Culture

“Due to special historical and realistic reasons, for a long time in the creation of South Korean films, the interpretation of its national state is placed on the tension between South Korea, North Korea, and Japan. As the most important “ally” of South Korea, the United States, has once become an unspeakable embarrassment state” [1]. The shame culture that films convey is rooted first in historical issues.

In history, there was a single nationality on the Korean Peninsula, Korean. Back in the Western Han Dynasty, Wiman Korea on the Korean Peninsula was the tributary of China. Before the Qing Dynasty, most of the Korean Peninsula had been regarded as the “Fan state” of the Chinese dynasties, which means a vassal state. But later, The Qing Government signed the *Treaty of Shimonoseki* in 1895 after its defeat in the Sino Japanese War, recognizing Korea as an independent state. In 1897, King Lee Hee of Korea proclaimed himself emperor and established the Korean Empire. But in 1910, just 13 years after its independence, the whole Korean Peninsula became a Japanese colony and this remained until Japan’s defeat in 1945. At this time, the North and the South of Korea has been divided. In 1948, with the help of the Americans, South Korea finally elected Syngman Rhee as the first president of the Republic of Korea. Thus, the South Korea was born. In the same year, the Soviet Union propped up Kim Il-Sung’s regime in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, i.e., North Korea, to maintain the political and military balance on the Korean peninsula. After the end of the Korean War, in order to prevent the further expansion of Soviet power, the United States actively carried out various construction projects in South Korea, provided capital and technical support for the development of capitalism in South Korea, and tightened its control over South Korea. In the military field, the United States has directly sent troops in South Korea until today. As a result, South Korea’s short history of more than 100 years has been marked by humiliation due to plunder and ethnic division.

Based on above, South Korea, which was a vassal state of the Qing Dynasty and then a Japanese colony, has formed a mixed culture. They not only have a sense of identity to the Eastern culture, but also have been looking for their own national culture due to the historical shame. Even in today’s rapid economic development, South Korea is still unable to get rid of the United States control over its international political and economic structure. For the U.S, South Korea is just a pawn they can throw away at any time to contain China, Russia and North Korea in East Asia. This sense of shame still hangs over South Korea and has become a deeply hidden scar in the hearts of South Koreans.

But Bong Joon-ho’s films always dare to break such taboos. In the movie *Snowpiercer*, a train carrying the last survivors of the earth travels around the planet through a perpetual motion machine, with each compartment a metaphor for different social classes. The bottom carriage corresponding to the bottom of society is very dark, symbolizing the exploitation of the South Korean Namgoong Minsu and her daughter Yona,

who are in a very difficult situation. There is an extreme lack of supplies, and even humans eating humans. The ruler in the locomotive, American Wilford, and the passengers in the senior carriages are undoubtedly the symbol of the supreme ruler and ruling class. They are free to sacrifice the people of the ruled class. The director's purpose here is not only to show the survival dilemma of Namgoong Minsu and his daughter Yona, but also to express the oppression and control of the United States on South Korea's international status through the film. Father and daughter want to get out of the bottom carriage, but they subsist on meringues produced by the ruling class. The meringue here is as disgusting as the cockroaches from which it is made, but still eaten by underclass in order not to starve. Just as in the present democratic representative system of South Korea, on the one hand, people are eager to get rid of the exploitation and control of the United States, but on the other hand, they have to rely on the authority of the United States in international affairs in order to survive. The film fully reflects the sense of humiliation in the hearts of South Koreans and South Korea's own thinking about their national future and destiny.

2.2 The Internal Causes of Shame Culture

South Korea's film industry began to establish a new film industry system at the end of the 20th century with the development of national politics and economy. "At that time, a group of directors known as the 386 generation emerged, who gradually began to grasp the direction of South Korean movies, and fundamentally changed its aesthetic maps" [2]. Bong Joon-ho, who officially entered the film industry in the late 1990s, is one of them. Compared with other contemporary directors who focus on the variety of image styles, Bong Joon-ho has always maintained a populist and underclass perspective, focusing on observing and reflecting the era in which he lives, which also makes his films have stronger realistic significance and social reflection.

The 1980s was a critical stage that South Korea strode toward a economic powerhouse, but also a dark and shameful period that Bong Joon-ho's *Memories of Murder* clearly reflects. The movie was based on a series of murders that took place in Hwaseong city, Gyeonggi-do province, South Korea between 1986 and 1991, when Chun Doo-hwan was in power under the Fifth Republic. Long permeated by American capitalism, Chun doo-hwan presided over seven years of brutal military dictatorship. It is undeniable that Chun doo-hwan made great efforts to develop the Korean economy during his administration. But at the same time, his violent suppression of the pro-democracy movement led to the Gwangju Massacre, in which 207 students and citizens were killed. Bong Joon-ho was in high school when the first bloodshed took place, and he participated in demonstrations when he entered Yonsei University to study sociology. Since the radical economic development and the "Americanized development" which did not conform to the national conditions of South Korea, the social structure of the whole country has changed abnormally in just a few years. The polarization of the rich and the poor was serious, leading to class solidification. This destructive radical development pushed the Korean society into a state of chaos.

The various events during this period that have become the most important internal reasons for the formation of shame culture in Korean society. In *Memories of Murder*, dozens of women, ranging in age from teens to seventies, were murdered over a period of

five years, while the killer was at large. The reason was that during the transition period of the old and new administrations, the blackout imposed by the government that provided the killer with many opportunities to commit the crime. At the same time, although the police in the film predicted that the murderer would kill again, they were all assigned to suppress the popular movement, resulting in a shortage of police to handle the case and the murder happened again. In addition, the political high-pressure situation made the relationship between the police and the people particularly tense, which directly led to the death of the witness in the film. The police, as a functional branch of the government, oppressed the people seriously. The protagonist of the film is a small-town policeman named Park Doo-man, who only follows his intuition to investigate the case. He and his subordinates brutally extract confessions without evidence and beat innocent people into confessions several times. Even in front of detective So Tae-yun, he tried to forge evidence to convict the retarded person as the real murderer. By the end of the film, the number of victims continued to rise, but the killer was still at large.

Memories of Murder creates a cycle in which police are often irresponsible in dealing with crimes under South Korea's power politics. The failed pursuit of the murder and another case have become symbols of shame. The shame here does not come from the oppression of other forces, but from the problems of South Korean society itself. This shame culture grows with every incident of violence and bloodshed. At the end of the film, the little girl who saw the killer described him as normal, just like the rest of us. This answer is ironic, implying that everyone is a murderer in the turbulent times. Through *Memories of Murder*, Bong tells the audience that the collective consciousness formed during the military dictatorship has become the shame of the Korean people. This shame culture stems from perpetrators who have never been arrested, from state officials who only assert their authority and bully the weak, and from a social system that is deeply stratified and unstable. *Memories of Murder* leaves audience with not only memories of serial killings, but also the shame culture that spread throughout Korean society in the 1980s.

2.3 The Shame Culture in “Bong-Style Movies”

The shame culture caused by the highly stratified Korean society and the long-term oppression of foreign forces frequently appears in Bong Joon-ho's Bong-style movies.

The movie *Gwoemul* is inspired by a real news about anti-American sentiment rising in Korea after the U.S. Forces Korea poured the toxic liquid into the Han River and the director's experience of seeing strange creatures in the Han River many years ago. In the film, an American scientist orders his South Korean underlings to pollute the water by dumping toxic chemical waste into the Han River, which creates mutated monsters. Concerns about possible environmental pollution from South Korean subordinates are ignored, while senior officials routinely bend to American directives. Therefore, when the monster attacked people, the Korean government did not try to destroy the monster, but followed the requirement of the U.S. army to release chemical gas indiscriminately and control the victim's family. In this process, the subordination of the two countries is clear. The name of the movie *Gwoemul* literally means *The Host*. This shows that the United States is the absolute ruler without right or wrong, while South Korea is the humiliating subservience. The director fully embodies the shame culture at the national

level, which is a sad loss of national identity due to the dependence on the United States, a fear about the national future.

This pervasive shame culture is also reflected in social class. “Bong Joon-ho once said that he wanted to convey that today’s era is controlled by capitalism. In capitalist society, there is no apparent distinction in status, but there is still an unbridgeable class gap in reality” [3]. This is best illustrated in the movie *Parasite* by the difference in the amount of sunlight two families get. Mr. Park and his family, who belong to the upper class of society, live in a villa on the top of the mountain, where the sun shines every corner of the house from sunrise to sunset. On the other hand, Kim ki-taek and his family, who live in a semi-basement, get no sunshine until noon every day, and even ordinary rainy days can drown their home in waist-high floods. Mr. Park and his family treat Mr. Kim and his family in a decent way, but he had no empathy for the plight of the lower class. He refers to them as servants in his communications with his wife and repeats the same line, “I hate people who cross the line.” Therefore, when Kim ki-rsteen (Kim ki-taek’s daughter) sets up a trap to get rid of the former driver, Mr. Park is not angry about the former driver’s indecent behavior in the car. Instead, he looks at the underwear left on the back seat and says, “Why not do it in the front seat? Why did you cross the line?” In his mind, there is nothing more shameful than crossing the line. The only thing that matters him is maintaining the boundary between the upper class and the underclass worlds. Between the two worlds, there is only employment relationship. The rich never have to worry about the poor trying to change the status quo. When Kim ki-woo (Kim ki-taek’s son) visited Mr. Park’s home to teach his daughter lessons, Park gave him an English name Kevin, and his sister was given an English name Jessica. As Mr. Park is a successful tech tycoon who back from U.S., the relationship between Americans and Koreans permeates the movie. Mr. Park believes that Americans is a symbol of the upper class and that the existence of the lower class itself is a disgrace. Even their names in Korean and the smell they exude are shameful and sinful.

It’s even sadder that not only those at the top of social class who feel superior to American identity and thus deny their own shameful national identity, but also the bottom feel themselves is shameful. In *Parasite*, when Kim Ki-rsteen interviewed for the job of art therapist for Mr. Park’s youngest son, she asked Mrs. Park to avoid the housekeeper Wen Guang who was from the bottom class. In this way, Kim Ki-rsteen is doing her best to deny her status as a disgraced lowlife, arguing that servants should not be present in such an elegant occasion. She is ashamed of the lower social class she comes from, but consoles herself that life is not the worst. Kim Ki-taek and his family members are the epitome of the underclass -- they fear that one day they will be completely back to the basement, but at the same time this family initiatively choose to return to the basement and accept the life of the underclass. In this film, Bong Joon-ho uses a precise perspective of social observation through two families to show the pervasive shame culture of denying national identity and stigmatizing the lower classes in Korean society.

3 The Alienation of the Bottom Survival

3.1 From Resistance to Choice

While keeping an eye on history and reality, Bong also casts a sympathetic look at his protagonists. As the camera is often aimed at the bottom of the little people, we can see these characters' gradually distorted and alienated thoughts and behaviors.

Gwoemul depicts the family of Park Kang-du who lives at the bottom of society. Park Kang-du, looks silly and runs a small shop by the river. His sister, Park Nam-joo, is an archery player who always fails at the critical moment. His little brother, Park Nam-il, is the only college student in the family but has no job. One day, his little daughter Park Xianxiu was carried off by a monster, and it was hard to tell whether she was alive or not. After unsuccessful appeals to the police and the hospital, the family decided to save their daughter by their own. However, in the process of implementation, the government repressed them as mental patients and arrested them into the hospital. No one believed their explanation because the family was underclass. Park Kang-du, indirectly caused his father's death by miscalculating the number of bullets remaining. However, this grandfather waved Park Kang-du away with relief until the last moment of his life without blaming his son Park Kang-du [4]. Grandfather's death woke up this numb family. After receiving the daughter's location from sister Park Nam-joo, cowardly Park Kangdu hijacked medical staff and escaped from the hospital. Brother Park Nam-il also destroyed the hospital's lighting system and escaped in chaos. Finally, the father found his daughter's corpse when he reached the river, which completely made the family fall into despair. Sister Nam-joo in the last moment shot an arrow to the monster. Father stood in front of the river and raised burning stick straight into the monster's body.

At the end of the movie, the father, Park Kang-du, adopts the little boy saved by his daughter and also is wanted by the police. But in the face of despair, this underclass family did not leave kinship and humanity. They won both against monsters and the weak and incompetent Korean government.

In the movie *Mother*, the image of Kim Hye-ja, the main character, becomes more complicated. Kim Hye-ja is a single mother at the bottom of the social class who is both a victim and a perpetrator. Through the film, the stifling life of the underclass is vividly presented. Kim Hye-ja, who had no income, tried to take her young son to suicide by feeding him the drinks laced with pesticides after her husband abandoned the family. The failed suicide left the son, Do-joon, mentally retarded as an adult, and the mother was the murderer. Therefore, when the son was coerced by the police to sign the confession of killing female student YaJing, the mother hoped to atone for herself by proving her son's innocence. However, in the process of investigation, she found that the stone that the son threw caused YaJing's death.

The lack of social status and income led the mother Kim Hye-ja to commit suicide with her young son, which can be interpreted as a desperate resistance against life. But the mother who knew the truth and killed the only witness with a wrench and set the house on fire was her own choice. In extreme cases, those at the bottom of society become distorted and alienated. The mother lost her sense of kinship and morality when she tried to poison her young son. She further lost her humanity when murdering the witness.

The Kim Ki-taek family from the bottom of society in The Oscar-winning film *Parasite* is even more different. Director Bong Joon-ho said, “The movie is about a poor family infiltrating a rich family and trying to occupy everything from the rich.” The poor family who live on the rich family is an active choice rather than a forced choice. Throughout the film, it is not difficult to find that the poor family actually has the strength to make money. On the wall of their basement is mother’s silver medal from the 1993 National hammer throw championship. After forging the diploma, Kim ki-woo said, “I don’t think this is a fraud or a crime, because I will definitely be admitted to this university next year.” Then he confidently went to Park’s home to apply for a job as a tutor. His sister Kim ki-rsteen is good at learning art, who learns PS technology by herself. The father Kim Ki-taek, is a good driver and can drive for the rich without spilling a drop of coffee. Mother is also adept at housework whose cut fruits are very delicate in shape. Why be parasites when they can make a living? The answer is laziness. Father pretended to be polite before getting the driver job but he often drove carelessly and used profanity when he officially began to work. Instead of teaching seriously, the son Kim Ki-woo tried to seduce Mr. Park’s daughter and hoped to marry with Mr. Park’s daughter to achieve eternal parasitism. This family even shamelessly lived in the villa without permission while Mr. Park went out camping and used all high-grade products unscrupulously.

They do not have the idea of stealing the secret code of wealth from the rich, just to satisfy the material desire to eat and drink. This is parasite, gnawing on the little profit and short-sighted. The Kim Ki-taek family voluntarily choose to abandon their human identity and become the lowest biological parasites. Zhong-sook, the mother of the poor family says, “These rich people are kind because they are rich. If I had enough money, I would be kinder.” They are unaware of this false self-awareness and believe in it as a philosophy of life. In order to be a worm, they lose their humanity and even choose to lose their self-consciousness.

Through Bong Joon-ho’s films, we can clearly see the step-by-step alienation of those people who at the bottom: from despair to resist, from lose kinship and human nature to lose self-awareness, finally, becoming parasites. At the end of the movie *Parasite*, Mr. Park and his family are unaware of the fact that the fugitive husband of former housekeeper Wen Guang has been living in their basement. Mrs. Park could not tell ketchup from blood, and her youngest son, Park Da-song, could not draw simple shapes even after changing many art teachers. How such a family becomes an upper class that symbolizes the elite in Korean society? The answer is: Poor families live on rich families, rich families live on their wealth and Korean society, everyone is a parasite.

3.2 The Tragic Pain Culture

Zhang Hao, in his book *Dark Consciousness and Democratic Tradition*, first purposed the concept of “dark consciousness”, said: “Dark consciousness comes from facing up all dark forces existing in human nature and universe. It is because these dark forces are so strong that the world is flawed rather than perfect and there are many evils and regrets in human life [5]. In short, “dark consciousness” is to look directly at the dark side of human nature. Bong Joon-ho is a director with a “dark consciousness”, which is why the pain culture comes from his movies. This pain culture is the pain that the upper

class oppresses and maltreats the lower class, but also the pain that the lower class kills each other.

As a result of a long history of ideological infiltration, the upper class of South Korea's government and public security authorities have become increasingly dependent on the successful American model [6]. They tend to concentrate only on accumulating prestige and resources for themselves, resulting in serious dogmatic errors [6]. In *Gwoemul*, the U.S. spokesman told the Korean people that there was no virus. But everybody knew that it was American scientists who dumped toxic chemical waste that caused the biological mutation in the Han River. The American scientists were not punished, and the Korean doctors who tried to prove that Park Kang-du had mental illness by operating a craniotomy to create a virus were not punished. In the national disaster, the government officials who still received dirty money and released chemical gas on the people under the pretext of "disinfection" became heroes. Only Park Kang-du, who lost his father's and daughter's lives, was considered insane and was wanted by the government nationwide. These pains made the man-eating monster in the Han River seemed less terrible. Similar cases happen in his other films. In *Memories of Murder*, the police Park Doo-man tried to fabricate evidence and convict the innocent in front of the detective So Tae-yun in order to solve the case as soon as possible. The lawyer in the movie *Mother*, who received almost all of the mother's savings as a reward, did not defend her son. All of these are manifestations of the pain culture in Bong's movies.

There is a long history of bullying and hostility from the top class towards the bottom. The killing of each other at the bottom is even more painful. This is a kind of abnormal psychology and behavior that borders on a suicide attack. In movie *Gwoemul*, Park Nam-il's old friend cheated Park Nan-il's life-saving money, at the same time, he also discussed with the police the size of the after-tax reward. In *Mother*, in order to save the son's life, Kim Hye-ja not only killed the witness but also allowed police to take away the retarded child Zong Ba to take the fall. In *Snowpiercer*, hungry passengers who in the bottom of the train even killed their fellow passengers to eat their arms and legs for survival. There is also the Kim Ki-taek family who want profit by other people's toil in the movie *Parasite*. They kicked out their former driver and then faked evidence that their former housekeeper Wen Guang had tuberculosis. After learning that Wen Guang's husband lived in Mr. Park's basement, in order to be able to do parasites forever, they felt at ease to try to kill the couple and replaced them.

Bong Joon-ho has been called an "accurate social observer" because he does not favor any social class with his subjective feelings. He captures perfectly the antagonism between social classes and the evils of the poor, and presents a real panic culture in a seemingly absurd movie.

4 The Creation Controversy of "Bong-Style Film" and the Metaphorical Culture of "She"

4.1 Extreme Elaboration and Ahead Concept

Gwoemul was released in Korea on 27 July 2006, and unquestionably set a new record for the highest grossing Korean film. At the same time, the film eventually obtained

\$2.2 million box office in North America, which was the highest grossing Korean film to break into Hollywood until 2006. It was also in 2006 that the controversy over the “Bong-style film” approach began to emerge.

The first controversy is “extreme exposition”, which is the exaggerated and fictional plight of the underclass in order to achieve the extreme goal of criticizing a particular group. For example, in each of his works, he criticizes the social functional departments and the upper class leaders represented by the Korean government and public security law. The way to achieve this is to create a stark contrast by exaggerating the plight of the underclass. After the movie *Parasite* came out, Bong Joon-ho said, “I was a math tutor in college. I once taught in a garden house with three rooms on the second floor. I still remembered the interview with the hostess and the feel of the marble floor and the roomy, cold feeling of the house. These memories became my references for writing the script. It would take 547 years to buy this luxury house with the average income of today’s Koreans” [7]. These are enough to show that the director’s personal experience and staggering numbers are much more exaggerated than in the film *Parasite*.

The dissatisfaction to the upper class in South Korea’s real life is far stronger than in the movie. From a group perspective, the current South Korean regime is a democratic representative system, externally dependent on the United States, while the domestic economic lifeblood is firmly controlled by the five local chaebol groups (Samsung, Hyundai, SK, LG, Lotte). The chaebol families unlimited hereditary succession, resulting in the “Matthew effect” of social wealth and class under the operation of capital. In short, upper-class children are born with the best resources, even if they have mediocre talents, they can inherit the family’s wealth and stay in the upper class. It is even more difficult for young people from poor families to rise up the social class through their own efforts. The mobility of class in Korean society is very poor, and the trend of class solidification has become more and more intense [8]. As a result, more than 60% of ordinary South Koreans surveyed in a 2020 poll had a negative view of the chaebol. The upper class is born with serious discrimination and trust crisis towards the bottom class, and the bottom class constantly complains because the upper class occupies a lot of resources and oppresses the bottom class for a long time.

Pier Paolo Pasolini, the famous Italian director, once proposed extreme artistic innovation with more positive social value. Such skepticism for extreme elaboration proved Bong’s unreserved representation of both the dark side of social class and characters’ mental states. Instead of questioning and covering up the director’s distinctive voice, the public should face the objective problems revealed by the film.

“Ahead concept” is another controversy that many critics have criticized him. Proponents of this claim say that Bong’s films, from *Snowpiercer*, *Okja*, to *Parasite*, have conceived a clear concept in advance, then piled various symbols, and finally made up the stories. Some even think that these three films all express the same “concept”: class satire. For example, the top carriage and the bottom carriage in *Snowpiercer*; Miranda Group, a genetic breeding company, and *Okja*, a transgenic pig that is destined for dinner in the film *Okja*; Mr. Park family’s villa and Kim Ki-taek family’s basement in *Parasite*. The characters in these films are highly homogeneous, which can be basically summarized as the ruling class and the exploited class. The characters lose their motivation, and the dialogue is all about conveying the “concept” that the director has in mind.

Bong Joon-ho once said in an interview, “Theater is not for satire. Film is still a medium for telling stories. It’s much more effective to wrap these elements up in the story than to criticize them directly.” Compared with the three films express the same concept of class satire, Bong actually conveys a different perspective: *Snowpiercer* is about how human beings should defend their right to survive from a global perspective. *Okja* is about under the food chain, no one has the right to edit genes and take life at will. *Parasite* is about the evil of people at the bottom. These can be described as “ahead concept”, but the film itself is also a process of visualizing these established concepts.

4.2 The Metaphorical Culture of “She” and Reflection

4.2.1 The Metaphorical Culture of “She” with Unified Double Sides

Female characters and stories have long been a staple of films. South Korea, like other Asian countries, has not avoided the long-simmering problem of male superiority by traditional patriarchy. Bong Joon-ho has also come under fire for often shaping “female victims” in his films. Scholars who hold this view believe that he deliberately belittles the female status and arranges the background of hard and tragic life experience for them. For example, the victims in *Memories of Murder* were all females, and the youngest daughter Park Xianxiu in *Gwoemul* who did not survive. In the movie *Mother*, Kim Hye-ja tried to commit suicide with her five-year-old son after her husband left her family. The helpless victims were all women in the bottom carriage of *Snowpiercer*. From the perspective of each character, these images all show that in the male-dominated society, women are often victims and dispensable marginal people.

But at the same time, characters cannot be separated from social background. Each of Bong’s films has its own special historical background. *Memories of Murder* took place during Chun Doo-hwan’s military dictatorship and ended with enraged and incompetent police who failed to catch the murderer. In the movie *Gwoemul*, Park Kang-du, a middle-aged man who crashed his business, not only failed to save his daughter who was kidnapped by a monster, but also killed his father unintentionally due to his stupidity. *Mother* reflected the oppression of a single mother at the bottom by unscrupulous lawyers and irresponsible policemen in the background of feudal patriarchy. Curtis, the man who killed his fellow passengers and ate human flesh due to hungry in the bottom of the train in *Snowpiercer*. And in *Parasite*, father Kim Ki-taek was lazy and greedy who lived on the rich. Each film is about men’s failure: incompetent male police, unscrupulous male lawyer, unconscionable male passenger, and slothful father.

On deeper analysis, women in these films appear not only as victims but also as power holders. For power holders, they were being themselves. For example, the wife who helped her husband become a professor in *Barking Dogs Never Bite*. Kim Hye-ja in the movie *Mother*, who independently investigated the case in order to prove the innocence of her retarded son. In the film *Gwoemul*, the police and the army could not be close to the monster, but sister Nam-joo who was far from it shoot an arrow and hit the monster. In *Snowpiercer*, Manson was a female director who distributed resources that all passengers relied on for survival, and in *Parasite*, the mother Zhong-sook slain the man who killed her daughter with her bare hands.

When these female characters are victims, they are the symbols of South Korea. In other words, there is a peer relationship between them. For example, the monster in

Gwoemul is caused by the dumping of toxic chemical waste by American scientists, so the monster itself symbolizes the United States. In the movie, the South Korean government is unable to impose any punishment on the American scientists, but can only suppress the people protest. Outside the movie, South Korea has to obey and depend on the United States in military affairs and international relations. Therefore, Park Xianxiu, a girl kidnapped by a monster, is the metaphor of Korea, which cannot resist. This study attributes this form of metaphor to Bong Joon-ho's unique metaphorical culture of "she".

4.2.2 Female Issues in Film and Social Reflection

Based on the metaphorical culture of "she", female issues are also reflected in Bong Joon-ho's films. The comparison is inevitable with Korean director Kim Ki-duk, who also raised sharp social issues about women in the movie *Empty Room*. Many middle class families in South Korea seem to be financially well-off and jolly, and women just need to stay at home and raise their children. But in fact, such women who do not work outside often suffer domestic violence, cold violence, and even sexual violence from their husbands. Their world is almost exclusively about their men. Without economic income, these female gradually lose the ability to live independently and the right to speak in the family. The only thing that can support their lives is their husband's erratic love. However, faced with the problems of female family status, social status and emotional needs in the film, director Kim Ki-duk did not offer a solution or reflection. In the film *Empty Room*, Seonhwa only used the way to resist domestic and sexual violence was to run away from home. Even this feeble resistance ended in failure. The husband brought Seonhwa home from the police station, then Seonhwa could only rely on fantasy to paralyze herself to continue live.

In essence, director Kim Ki-duk does not fight for equal rights for women, but presents female issues as spectacles. His narrative and cinematic lens are full of male perspective, conniving at violence while allowing women to conform to the spirit of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. "As a repressed group, women are naturally eager to expose misconceptions and lies on themselves. But an overly simplistic conception of cinematic realism can cause other problems, which conceals the particular forms in social and historical facts" [9]. Therefore, Kim Ki-duk is also an oriental formalist in his narration of female issues.

Back to Bong's movies, it is not hard to see that men in Bong's films fail as themselves, as husbands and as fathers. In his debut film *Barking Dogs Never Bite*, a husband who failed in his career and took his anger out on his dog, and finally his wife helped him become a professor. In this relationship, it is clear that the woman is in control. The movie *Memories of Murder* criticized the incompetent and irresponsible of male law-executor and the police. In the film *Mother*, which showed an irresponsible father in family life. Such failures include abandonment of family, low self-worth, few social contribution, and weakness in the face of emergencies. This is a cynical comment on the long-standing patriarchy in the East Asian cultural circle in which Korea is located. In addition, both a female director Manson who marshals resources for the survival of the entire train in *Snowpiercer* and a mother Zhong-sook who overpowers her daughter's killer with her bare hands in *Parasite*, are affirmations to female power. Women have independent social values and are still qualified mothers in the context of the collapse of patriarchy.

In Bong's films, women are encouraged to fight against all inequities and even defend their rights by violent means.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, there have been many films focusing on female issues in South Korea. Film *Address Unknown* confronts the current situation of Korean women who were abandoned by the U.S. army during the war. *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* tells the revenge of women who were falsely imprisoned. *The Handmaiden* focuses on the love and rights of the female gay community. Among them, *Hope*, a movie about female victims that promoted *The Special Act on The Punishment of Sexual Violence against Minors* and *The Chemical Castration Act* in South Korea. It is clear that director Bong Joon-ho, as a member who cares about female social issues, is using the power of his film to push the society, and at least the protagonists in his film, to find ways and institutions to solve female problems.

5 Conclusion

South Korea abolished film censorship in 1997 and instituted a film rating system the following year. The reform of the film system unshackled the chains for the development of the film industry. At the same time, the new South Korean film movement from the mid-1990s to the early 21st century has provided Korean filmmakers with a wider space for creation and expression. Bong Joon-ho was born in 1969, and he entered the film industry in the late 1990s, the golden period. Compared to contemporaneous film directors, he has neither the implicitness and pathos of Lee Chang-dong, nor Kim Ki-duk's extreme love for violent aesthetics. Bong Joon-ho is also not as good as Park Chan-wook at making thriller and revenge movies. He is more like an accurate social observer who strikes the balance between reality and metaphor.

Bong Joon-ho's films have always reflected the era in which he lived and its film cultures. The most typical one is the shame culture caused by the history of foreign invasion and the chaos of South Korea's own social structure. There is a pain culture that reflects conflicts between social classes and people at the bottom of society killing each other. There is also the metaphorical culture of "she" with unique personal characteristics in "Bong-style films". From the perspective of the inherent social class in South Korea, this paper analyzes the reasons for the formation of shame culture, pain culture and their specific performances in the films, which arouses the public awareness of self-identity, national identity and national future. At the same time, combined with the work itself, this paper also studies the controversy on the film creation caused by "Bong-style film", such as its extreme elaboration and ahead concept. And Bong Joon-ho's unique metaphorical culture of "she" in which the female role of the victim corresponds to South Korea. Then the study analyzes his query and rebellion against the patriarchal system in the East Asian cultural circle in which South Korea is located. Bong' films not only express the current situation of female survival and social problems but also urge the society to actively seek solutions and new systems.

As expected, *Parasite* won the Oscar for Best Picture in 2020, which proves that Bong's directorial prowess has reached beyond Asia to gain international recognition. As one of the main forces of current South Korean film directors, he always places himself in the realistic social environment and tells stories about human nature one after

another with a strong sense of authenticity and film culture. Bong Joon-ho gives us a real sense of the cinematic world that he created with his characteristically objective perspective and metaphorical lens.

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